State of California—The Resources Agency

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Memorandum

To : The Conservancy
The Advisory Committee

Date: September 26, 2005

From : Joseph T. Edmiston, FAICP, Executive Director

Subject: **Agenda Item 16: Consideration of resolution adopting an urban/wildland interface native habitat restoration and enhancement program, and authorizing funding pursuant to Proposition 12, Proposition 40, and Proposition 50.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Conservancy adopt the attached resolution adopting an urban/wildland interface native habitat restoration and enhancement program, and authorizing funding in an amount not to exceed $150,000, in total, pursuant to Proposition 12, Proposition 40, and Proposition 50.

Legislative Authority: Section 33211 of the Public Resources Code

Background: The urban/wildlands interface on public lands in the Santa Monica Mountains Zone is variably exposed to human pressures above and beyond more interior open space areas. Much of this pressure comes from frequent recreational use, various forms of habitat modification, and management neglect. Depending on the location, habitat degradation from these causes is often ongoing and worsening each year. Some of the results are highly senescent stands of vegetation, compacted and eroded soils, and areas dominated by noxious, non-native weeds of Eurasian origin. Such conditions result in a diminution of the landscape's aesthetics, safety, and functional value for visitors. In addition, such conditions lead to an ongoing decline in biological resource value. The effect is that many of the public-owned open space areas most visited or viewed by the public offer a substandard experience and present a variety of hazards. Part of the Conservancy's mission is make wildlands accessible and inviting to urban residents. The proposed urban/wildland interface native habitat restoration and enhancement program addresses this issue, in part. This program envisions funding for strategic vegetation thinning, planting of native trees, and purchasing key equipment.

Community Restoration Through Enhanced Vegetation Management

The major component of this program is to employ enhanced vegetation management to begin to offset habitat degradation from high usage, neglect, disturbance, lack of beneficial natural disturbance (such as fire), and other historic effects. The least expensive method of vegetation management is the cutting, pruning, shredding, herbiciding, and removal of undesirable living and dead vegetation. Undesirable vegetation can range from low growing non-native annuals to large diameter dead wood in the tallest oak trees. The goal of this program is to use low cost

methods to simultaneously reduce the vigor and distribution of exotic species and to promote the vigor and distribution of the most desirable native species that occur, or would be expected to occur, in an area. The desired outcome is urban/wildland interface areas that exhibit high native species diversity, low danger from heavy fuel loads, reduced flash fuels that promote combustion, safe inviting appearances, and a vegetation dynamic that is naturally moving in a direction where native plant species are displacing exotic species. Essentially the proposed program would restore and rehabilitate habitat on public lands in the urban/wildland interface.

Typical public urban/wildlands land management practices focus intensive energy in high recreational use areas and often no human energy in infrequently visited areas. However, both types of areas may have a need for increased vegetation management whether to achieve greater public fire safety, to rejuvenate plant communities in the absence of the beneficial effects of fire or flooding, or to eliminate major seed source areas of non-native, invasive plant species. The significantly greater exposure of the public to the urban/wildlands interface (a result of proximity and accessibility to population centers), as opposed to interior natural areas, warrants additional resources to address these issues and improve the general public experience on lands related to the Conservancy's mission. A lack of attention will inevitably lead to declining conditions that may be irreversible even within times of optimal funding availability.

Any additional restoration effort makes an incremental improvement towards the goals of this program. Employing top rate ecological knowledge to minimize funding input and maximize the described benefits is paramount to this proposed program. The recognition of key timing intervals, plant relationships, and the effects of rainfall patterns can be effective tools in this effort. The desired net result is natural systems, that for the most part, will have been healed, or been adequately adjusted, such that they will not require substantive human input for decades, or ideally ever again. For example, pruning (including removing excess branch weight) a large oak tree along a trail may prevent a complete splitting of the trunk and enable a tree to provide habitat, a seed source, and human shade for decades. Eliminating dead wood in a portion of a drainage bottom can also correct a pattern of erosion that would otherwise eliminate important riparian habitat or a difficult to replace section of trail.

Vegetation Planting Combined with Selective Thinning

In some cases, the planting of specific plant species (generally trees) is the most permanent restoration technique to achieve some of the program goals. Annual brush clearance areas in the urban wildlands interface offer such an example. The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) is charged with clearing over 500 acres of parkland to meet City and County mandated brush clearance requirements. Almost 100 of these acres are on lands owned by the Conservancy. In almost all relevant vegetation types, a type conversion occurs after repeated brushing. The result is a vegetation cover dominated by annual non-

native annual grasses and weeds. Such vegetation is not without biological value but it provides far less resources to wildlife than the mosaics of chaparral, coastal sage scrub, and woodland understory that it replaces. The annual proliferation of undesired seeds in turn elevates the potential invasive pressure of these weeds on surrounding lands. In the case of species such as star thistle, the results may be irreparable. These type converted areas are also havens for high density gopher populations that exacerbate these problems. Furthermore, such type converted areas have far less capacity to prevent earth movement, reduce erosion, and capture and infiltrate water. The result is a combination of visual degradation and habitat loss.

In many such areas, state-of-the-art fuel modification–such as limbing up woody shrubs and trees at various spacing intervals (selective thinning)–can offer reasonable habitat value in clearance areas. Coast live oaks in particular can create enough shade and litter to substantially, and favorably, alter the composition, size, and distribution of many non-native weed species. In addition, many fire and vegetation professionals are recognizing the value of mature coast live oak trees, and in particular groves, in limiting both the spread of wildland fire and fire damage to nearby structures. Much of this value stems from the trees' height, water content, and suppressed understory growth. Other native species such as cherry, coffee berry, and bay laurel can provide similar, if not fully equivalent, benefits. In all cases these species with evergreen, succulent leaves provide high quality habitat resources. A program that maximizes the presence of these species along with coast live oaks in fuel modification areas would have demonstrable biological, hydrological and visual benefits. Pruning existing native vegetation can also make key woody species less susceptible to death from fire, pests or disease and enable them to out compete invasive exotic plants that threaten the success of a restoration effort.

In many cases, a combination of slope, aspect and soil depth may preclude either the establishment or strong growth or all or many of these species. However, there are many areas where they can be planted and/or existing individuals can be enhanced. Once established, their benefits can last up to a century or far beyond in the case of coast live oaks. The other added benefit is that the shade and stability offered by this set of native species provides increasingly improved conditions that favor desirable native sub-shrubs and herbaceous species. Such lower growing plant species provide more habitat resources, more aesthetic qualities, less dense fuel load, and reduced man hours to conduct fuel modification as necessary. The long term public value of these enhancements in the urban wildlands interface warrant the creation of a program to implement them where it is cost effective. Such cost effectiveness will increase substantially as the success and failure of various methods and timing are attempted and noted. In addition, the palette of plants, and thus public benefits, will inevitably expand.

The proposed urban/wildland interface native habitat restoration and enhancement program would expand incrementally to build on successes. It is proposed to occur on properties owned

by both the Conservancy and the MRCA. The geographic extent would cover areas as far east as Mount Washington, as far north as the Upper Las Virgenes Open Space Preserve, as far west as Westlake, and as far south almost to Sunset Boulevard for many open space areas near the southern boundary of the Santa Monica Mountains Zone.

Program Implementation

To implement this program, in some cases the Conservancy would contract directly with another State agency such as the California Conservation Corps or with a non-profit such as the Los Angeles Conservation Corps or Northeast Trees. Contracts could also be let with professional landscape firms. In cases where planted vegetation needs to be established such contracts would be multi-year contracts. Additional years are necessary for watering, weeding and plant replacement. It may also be determined that the Conservancy's procurement of large equipment is a key element of the program. In this case the Conservancy could make select purchases.

Propositions 12, 40, and 50 each have eligibility requirements for the Conservancy's expenditure of funds. The scope of work for each contract will be consistent with all the requirements of a Proposition. The proposed action authorizes the expenditure of up to $150,000 among all three propositions. No proposition would fund more than $100,000 of this $150,000 amount. It may be that no funding is used from one of the propositions.